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A review of strength and conditioning internships: The UKSCA's State of the Nation survey

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OVERVIEW

Internships within the strength and conditioning (S&C) industry have become a 'right of passage' for any junior or student coach wanting to gain employment. They have recently been described as 'the new degree',³ implying that formal education is no longer sufficient enough to gain employment on its own. Given the importance of practical skills required to successfully deliver S&C coaching, there is an expectation that applicants for professional jobs possess an appropriate level of experience.² The UKSCA decided to conduct a survey of S&C interns in order to discover just exactly what kind of experiences they receive during their internships. The results are presented and discussed below.

Introduction

An internship has been described as a method of gaining career-specific experience by carrying out key roles associated with the profession, under the guidance of an appropriately qualified and experienced practitioner and mentor.² Mentoring, which has been described as the passing of knowledge, experience and skills from a person of expertise, is essential to ensure a quality experience for the intern.⁴

Typically, the objective and motivation of junior coaches undertaking internships is to apply academic knowledge learned through a degree, to demonstrate competency as

a practitioner, and ultimately to improve their prospect of employment. However, the factors that motivate employers to recruit interns can be driven by skill and work capacity shortages within organisations which perhaps do not have the financial capabilities to employ more staff. Consequently a minority of organisations may be recruiting highly qualified interns to full-time posts, and not providing the appropriate remuneration. Therefore, although an internship should be a two-way mutually beneficial relationship, not all provide an effective learning experience. Unfortunately in recent times, the perception of internships is exactly that: ie, that they are driven by the needs of the employer and

Table 1. Definition of terms**WORK EXPERIENCE:**

Usually a short period of time within an organisation, typically two weeks. This usually involves shadowing staff to learn by observation, and conducting relatively simple tasks to get some practical experience. This work is typically unpaid.

INTERNSHIPS:

These are of longer duration, for example summer internships, but also last up to a year. They are usually graduate roles, are structured, and offer training. For many organisations, having an internship on your CV is considered important, as you are expected to have experienced the roles and responsibilities of the profession. In general, internships are paid as you are considered a 'worker'; however, some companies state that these are on a volunteer basis, or cover expenses only.

PLACEMENTS:

In general, placements are considered an assessed part of an academic programme. They range in duration from a few months to a year; they are structured, and involve training. Training may be delivered by academic staff as part of lessons, with the placement seen as an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge or work under 'real world' scenarios. Placements involve work duties similar to an internship and may or may not be paid.

can be exploitative, often don't conclude with employment and – in extreme cases – may even be detrimental for a coach's development.² Interestingly, within the past three years there have been several papers published in this area, which are specific to S&C.^{1,2,4,5,6} This potentially highlights the growing interest and momentum in this issue, and the need for standards to be developed across the industry. Furthermore, these papers (bar one) have all been generated by UK-based coaches and academics, perhaps also suggesting an issue that requires urgent attention within the domain of the UKSCA.

Therefore, in response to growing concerns, the UKSCA established a project team (with the overall remit of designing

Coach Development Guidelines), with the following objectives: (1) accomplish better working practices for early career coaches in employment and internships; (2) support employers in managing the development of coaches and interns; and (3) support higher education (HE) in building valuable work experience into their programmes. In order for the project team to better understand and thus advise future internships, it was decided that coaches and aspiring coaches alike must first have their say.

Subsequently a questionnaire was developed, referred to as the State of the Nation Survey (SoNS), with the objective being to elicit key information regarding experiences and practices of interns within Great Britain and Ireland. To the authors' knowledge, only one other research study has investigated these particular characteristics within S&C interns themselves.⁶ Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to highlight findings of the SoNS and provide points of discussion on the characteristics and experiences of S&C internships. It is further intended that the SoNS will provide valuable information surrounding the effectiveness of current internships and will consequently aid the UKSCA in supporting both organisations and individuals who are seeking these opportunities.

The second aim of this paper is to provide some insight into the strategies that are being considered by the UKSCA, to help advise the intern process. It should be stated that the UKSCA cannot police the internship process, as of course any individual (or organisation) choosing to do one, does so of their own volition. Instead, we hope the decision to engage with one or not, can be better guided by the findings reported in this article and the subsequent resources produced.

Before we delve into the SoNS results and discussion of, it is prudent to first define and discuss the terms 'work experience', 'internships' and 'placements', as they are commonly used interchangeably, but do differ in meaning. The UKSCA will use the definitions identified in Table 1, noting that they may even differ across organisations.

Methods

The survey was designed by a panel of S&C coaches on behalf of the UKSCA to ascertain information from individuals who were either actively coaching within – and/or studying within – the field of S&C. The survey was

Table 2. Best practice recommendations of an internship as recommended by Brannigan¹

- 1) Empower, offer responsibility and provide the opportunity to work within 'real world' projects
- 2) Ensure a mentor is in place for the duration of the internship to facilitate development. This is to include an individual development plan with timely assessments
- 3) Carry out a thorough induction to all areas of the organisation and provide access to policies, procedures and philosophies
- 4) Offer opportunities to showcase the work of the intern inside the organisation
- 5) Conduct an exit interview (if no employment was offered)

designed and developed using SoGoSurvey Software (<http://www.sogosurvey.com>) and was available on the UKSCA website, advertised through social media and sent via email using the UKSCA's membership database. National governing bodies (NGB), institutes of sport, professional sports clubs and educational institutions were emailed and the survey was completed remotely. The survey was sent and completed in May 2016 and was completed by 600 people. The format of the survey was split into two sections. Part 1 was designed to examine the characteristics of current interns and Part 2 was designed to evaluate the experiences of internships based upon some of the best practice recommendations highlighted by Brannigan,¹ which are outlined on the previous page in Table 2. The questions within Part 1 comprise three sections: (1) coach demo-graphic information; (2) education and coaching experience; and (3) details about the organisation and athlete population. Each section consisted of closed multiple-choice questions, with some allowing participants to make comments. Comments allowed for an expression of opinion and thus a more detailed insight of the internship experience. Data analysis procedures were descriptive in nature, with frequency counts and percentages calculated.

Results

PART 1: Current internship data

Data reported within this section has been extracted from the survey only if the participant reported that their current employment status was 'intern/placement'.

COACH DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

From a total of 600 SoNS respondents, 94 (16%) identified their employment status as 'intern/placement', 86 (91%) were male, 6 (6%) female and 2 (3%) did not specify. The majority of interns were aged 25 years and below (see Figure 1), White-British (68%), and worked in London or the South East of England (33%) (see Figure 2).

EDUCATION AND COACHING EXPERIENCE

With regards to the highest level of formal education, 42% of interns have completed a master's degree, with another 42% having completed a bachelor's degree. The remaining 16% were those who had achieved AS/A-level/BTEC (or equivalent, 12%), compulsory education (1%), doctoral degree (1%) and other (2%).

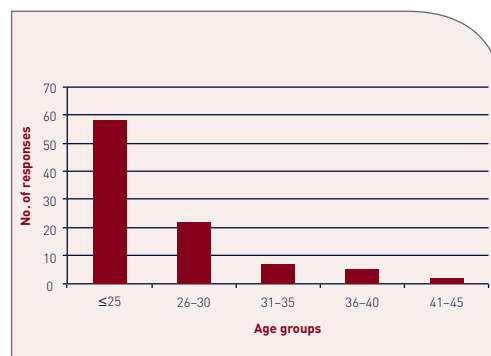


Figure 1. Age of intern

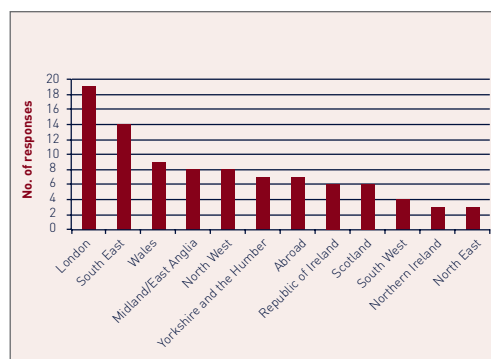


Figure 2. Geographical location of current internships

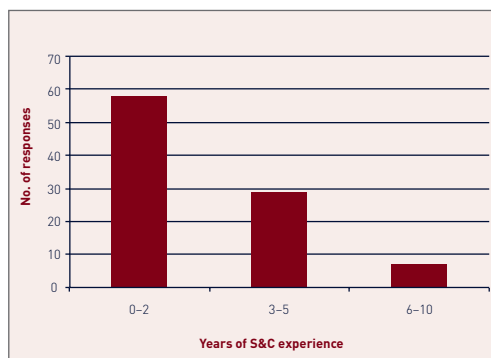


Figure 3. Years of S&C coaching in athletic populations

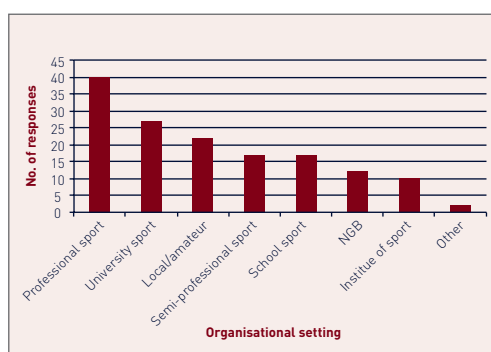


Figure 4. Organisational setting at which participants were completing their internship

UKSCA accreditation (ASCC) is commonly regarded as a pre-requisite for employment within the S&C industry in Great Britain. Findings reported that only 9 (10%) interns had achieved ASCC status, 63 (67%) held associate memberships, and 22 (23%) had neither. With reference to (S&C) coaching experience in athletic populations, the majority of interns reported having 0-2 years (62%) (see Figure 3).

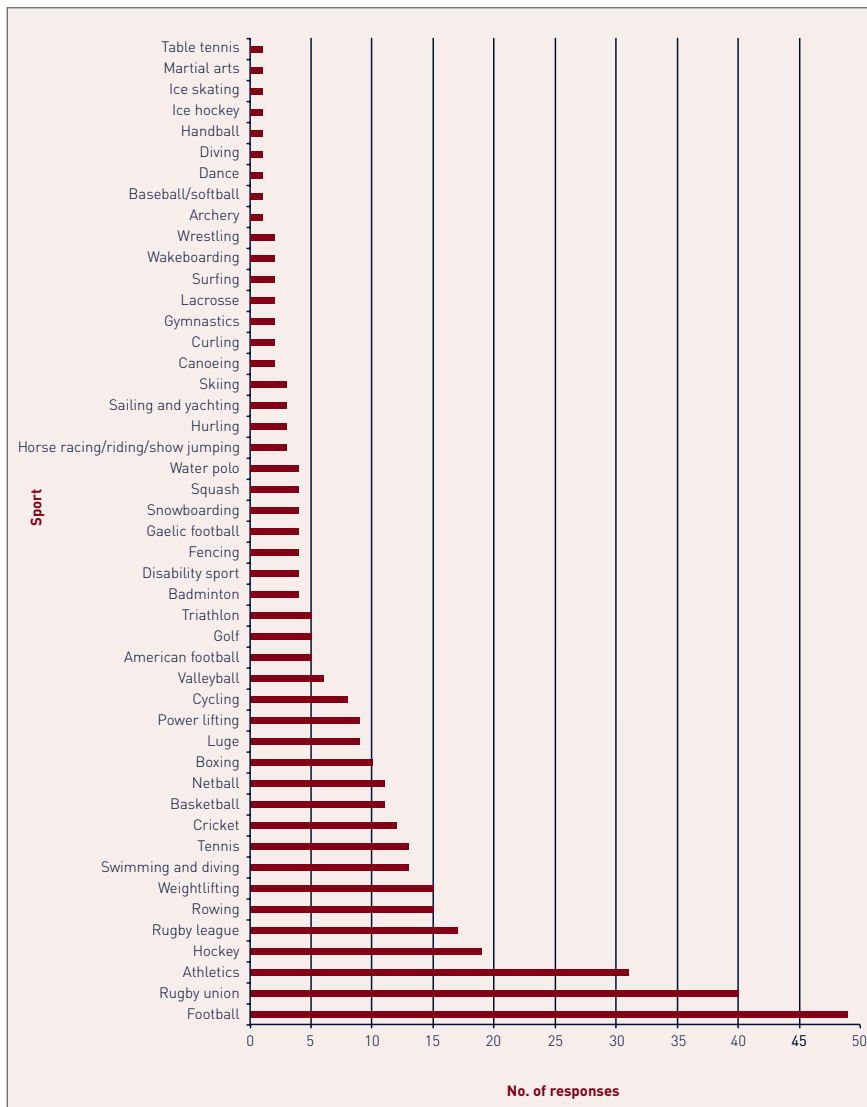


Figure 5.
Sport and number of interns

ORGANISATION AND ATHLETE POPULATIONS

In response to what gender the intern worked with, 26 (28%) answered male, 68 (72%) answered mixed (male and female athletes), and no-one (0%) reported working exclusively with females. When asked what age group/s the interns worked with, the results were as follows: ≤ 7 years old = 5%, 8–12 = 12%, 13–18 = 32%, 19–24 = 30%, and > 25 = 22%.

Professional sport (37%) was the most popular organisational setting for internships, followed by university sport (25%), local/amateur (21%), semi-professional (16%), school sport (16%), NGB (11%), Institute of sport (9%), and other (2%) (see Figure 4).

Sports that recruit the highest amount of interns include football (13%), rugby union (11%) and athletics (8%) (see Figure 5). Of the 94 interns, 71 (76%) reported working with two or more sports and only 23 (24%) reported interning in a single sport.

Part 2: Experiences of internships

Data reported within this section have only been extracted from the survey if the participant responded 'Yes' to the question: 'Are you currently completing or have you previously completed an internship in the last five years?'

From the 600 participants who completed the SoNS survey, 339 (57%) reported that they had not undertaken an internship in the past five years, whereas 247 (41%) confirmed that they were currently undertaking or had undertaken an internship within the past five years. A further 14 (2%) participants did not complete the question. The majority of participants reported to having completed one (35%) or two (38%) internships, with others reporting three (17%), four (6%) and five and above (4%) (See Figure 6).

Participants reported finding and gaining internship opportunities through such means as: professional/personal relationships (41%); link with higher education (34%); UKSCA website (12%); social media (9%); other (3%); and other websites (1%). Of note, when specifying 'other', participants reported using direct emails/enquiries.

The majority of internships lasted between 10–12 months (40%), with 12-plus months accounting for 28% (see Figure 7). A high proportion of participants reported that their internship was unpaid (72%), with only a further 13% receiving expenses to cover travel and other costs. This adds up to 85% of interns operating as volunteers, or only having expenses covered (Table 3). Two respondents (1%) reported that their employer financially contributed to their master's degree tuition fees as payment for services.

Within a recent article, Brannigan¹ reported that the most rewarding internships should:

1) Empower, offer responsibility and provide the opportunity to work within 'real world' projects.

When asked whether the internship offered a real world working project/s for the duration of the internship, 143 (58%) participants responded 'Yes', 83 (34%) 'No' and the remaining 21 (8%) did not think it was applicable or did not answer. Further to this, 244 (98%) reported directly working with athletes during their internship.

2) Ensure a mentor is in place for the

duration of the internship to facilitate development. This is to include an individual development plan with timely assessments.

The participants were asked if they had regular access to a mentor, to which 202 (80%) confirmed that they did. However, only 100 (41%) participants reported having an individual development plan and 145 (59%) having had regular opportunities for feedback. This resulted in 138 (57%) having no individual development plan and 99 (40%) having no regular feedback during their internship. With regards to continued professional development (CPD) opportunities, only 124 (51%) and 80 (34%) participants reported being offered internal and external CPD respectively.

Below are some comments in relation to this latter point:

'Nothing in place to ensure full understanding'

'I wasn't given the support and learning environment to help me become a better coach. I learnt alone from shadowing coaches'

'In terms of hands on coaching yes, but CPD and formal structure was lacking'

3) Carry out a thorough induction to all areas of the organisation and provide access to policies, procedures and philosophies.

127 (57%) participants reported being offered an induction into the organisation, with a further 88 (40%) not being offered and 7 (3%) deeming it not applicable. When asked if they had access to the organisation's processes, procedures and philosophy, 194 (79%) responded 'Yes'.

4) Offer opportunities to showcase the work of the intern inside the organisation.

Only 90 (36%) participants reported having opportunities to showcase their work to their colleagues, with 127 (51%) reporting no such opportunity and 30 (12%) either not replying or stating it wasn't applicable.

5) Conduct an exit interview (if no employment was offered).

A positive finding from this survey revealed that 44% of internships resulted in employment at the same organisation.

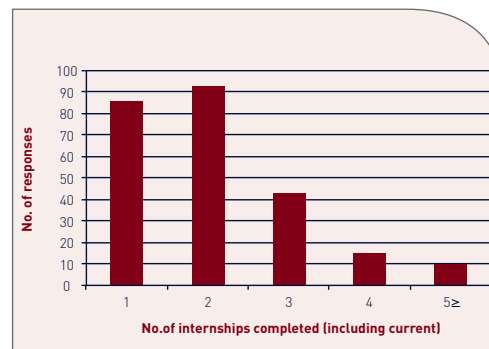


Figure 6.
Number of internships completed to date, including current internship (if applicable)

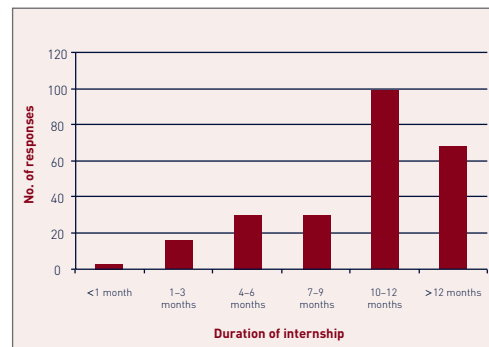


Figure 7.
Total duration of current or most recent internship

However, the majority of organisations are not completing exit interviews, with 68% of respondents not being offered one.

The participants were asked whether they believed the internship provided appropriate skills and experiences to gain employment within the S&C industry and 174 (79%) of participants reported that it did. A range of comments made in relation to this question can be seen below:

'Without completing my work placement I would not be in my current role or developed many of the skills necessary to work with elite athletes.'

'From a practical perspective yes, from an academic perspective no'

Table 3. Remuneration for current or most recent internship (per annum)

REMUNERATION	NO. RESPONSES	%
Voluntary	175	72
Expenses only	31	13
Session rate	14	6
< £11,999 pa	18	7
£12,000 - £14,999 pa	1	0
£15,000 - £17,999 pa	2	1
£18,000 - £20,000 pa	1	0
> £20,000 pa	1	0

'Another significant finding indicated that organisations had few employed staff and relatively high numbers of interns.'

'It offered me a good insight into a professional club and I had one good mentor but that is it. It could have offered much more if time/expenses were covered. I couldn't afford to spend more time there'

'I hugely enjoyed my internship but I think I developed little in terms of S&C. I learnt mostly about elite environments and culture'

'Long hours set with little meaningful responsibility related to actual coaching. Most responsibilities were around cleaning, preparing and providing fluids or shakes'

Discussion

In this instance, the primary aim of the SoNS was to investigate the current state of internships and understand the experiences of those who were completing or who had recently completed them. The demographic and placement locations of these respondents were in agreement with Read et al,⁶ as was the finding that over two thirds were educated to a minimum of bachelor's degree, and that a quarter of participants had achieved accreditation with either the UKSCA or NSCA. Findings from Read et al⁶ also revealed that weekly time demands of interns were often 21-40 hours, that interns assisted in the coaching, evaluation and monitoring of athletes, and that a high proportion of internships were full-time positions with formal obligations. Findings from both this survey and Read et al⁶ indicate that the vast majority of interns receive no remuneration for these services. This may support the worrying perception that a small minority of organisations are employing full-time interns to supplement staffing levels and that they are potentially exploiting willing individuals who wish to gain experience and ultimately employment within the industry.

In general, internships should be paid at least the national minimum wage, as organisations normally aim to recruit graduates who can benefit their workforce (<https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage/who-gets-the-minimum-wage>). It appears that most internships are operating as work placements, although not all are affiliated with academic institutions

and thus not always using students: this highlights the interchanging definition of these terms. It should be noted that there is no law governing internships, and organisations can choose to offer unpaid internship programmes if they wish. Those who work unpaid are classified as 'volunteers' and should be aware that they are under no obligation to perform work, and have no contract of employment.⁵ If any payment is made to a volunteer (other than expenses for training, food, drink and travel), the volunteer immediately becomes a worker or employee, with rights to the national minimum wage and employment rights. Of note, such laws only apply to graduate interns and are not applicable to students who are completing work placements alongside an education programme (see web link on the left); this includes research placements where students use the opportunity provided to acquire data for projects and dissertations.

Another significant finding indicated that organisations had few employed staff and relatively high numbers of interns.⁶ This not only supports the hypothesis that interns are populating employed roles, but also negatively impacts the level of support a mentor can offer. In previous reports, it had been suggested that employers should be expected to provide development objectives and regular feedback.²

Although current and previous research suggests that the majority of interns are allocated a mentor, there was little evidence to suggest that mentors were conducting individual development plans, formal meetings and appraisals: ie, fulfilling their roles and responsibilities by definition. In addition to a lack of appropriate mentoring, only half of internships provided internal CPD and even less than half provided external CPD. This was consistent with Read et al,⁶ who also reported that half of participants received CPD activities. These findings may suggest that the mentor does not have the appropriate skill set, time or resources available to organise and conduct such activities, or that the organisation/mentor utilise interns to fulfil labour requirements, and do not value the learning experience of their intern. It is clear that organisations hiring interns should define the roles they require interns to fulfil and

establish the development needs of the prospective intern to ensure suitability and provide an effective placement. At no point should interns be hired because the budget precludes the employment of a full time coach.²

Results from this survey, along with Read et al,⁶ would suggest that although interns are gaining valuable experiences, the internship process is not always the structured and effective learning environment that has previously been recommended by the aforementioned publications. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the conversion rate from intern to employee at the corresponding organisation was reported to be 44%, and that the majority of participants reported their placement provided them with the necessary skills and experience to gain employment within the field of S&C. As such, there are many organisations undoubtedly providing excellent learning environments and the internship process is still to be encouraged.

It is logical and mostly evident that internships form a valuable learning experience that is unique and different to formal education. Internships can provide a skill set that is not normally available through undergraduate or postgraduate study alone, as well as providing an environment where there is ample opportunity to hone the delivery of class taught theory and practice. However, to maximise any placement it must be structured effectively and designed to be mutually beneficial for both the organisation and individual. Read et al⁶ outlined some recommendations for both interns and organisations to ensure an effective placement, including the following:

- Establishing the training needs of the intern prior to commencement of placement
- Effective mentoring programme with appropriately qualified person
- Documentation of individual development plan, formal meetings and appraisals
- CPD relevant to interns' needs
- Understanding employment

law surrounding employment classification, work obligations, payment and statutory rights

What next from the UKSCA?

The final aim of the SoNS was to use the results gained to develop a support structure that encourages and enables a higher standard of internship within the S&C industry. This support structure and accompanying resources will be available to both organisations and individuals seeking internships, and will include templates for personal development plans, feedback and appraisal meetings and exit interviews. This will not only provide organisations with a 'road map' of how to design and implement a successful internship experience, but will also highlight what interns should be looking for when applying for prospective internships.

The UKSCA will also establish a grants fund – starting in early 2017 – to provide free UKSCA workshop places for those organisations which are committed to running quality internship programmes, but may not have the financial capacity to support their early career coaches. These plans will hopefully go some way to combat the limitations identified by the SoNS.

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